



Freebies Culture in Indian Politics: Constitutional and Legal Dimensions

Prof. Ajay Kumar Singh

Department of Law

K.S. Saket P.G. College, Ayodhya

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of “freebies culture” in Indian politics has become a subject of intense debate in recent years, raising significant constitutional, legal, economic, and ethical concerns. Political parties frequently promise free goods and services—such as electricity, water, loan waivers, and consumer items—to attract voters during elections. While such measures are often justified as welfare initiatives aimed at socio-economic upliftment, critics argue that they distort electoral fairness, burden public finances, and undermine democratic accountability. This paper critically examines the constitutional and legal dimensions of freebies in Indian politics. It analyzes the relevant provisions of the Constitution, including the Directive Principles of State Policy, fiscal responsibility norms, and electoral regulations. The study also evaluates judicial pronouncements and the role of the Election Commission of India in regulating electoral promises. Furthermore, it explores the distinction between welfare policies and populist giveaways, highlighting the challenges in drawing a clear legal boundary. The paper concludes by suggesting reforms to ensure transparency, fiscal discipline, and accountability in electoral practices, while preserving the welfare objectives of the state.

1. Introduction

The Indian democratic framework is characterized by vibrant electoral competition, where political parties seek to attract voters through various policy promises and welfare schemes. In recent years, the practice



of offering “freebies” has gained prominence as a strategy to secure electoral support. These freebies may include free electricity, water, farm loan waivers, subsidized transport, and even consumer goods such as televisions and laptops.

While such promises are often presented as welfare measures aimed at improving the standard of living, they have raised important constitutional and legal questions. Critics argue that freebies may distort the level playing field in elections, encourage fiscal irresponsibility, and create a culture of dependency among citizens. On the other hand, proponents contend that such measures are essential for addressing socio-economic inequalities and fulfilling the goals of a welfare state.

This paper seeks to examine the constitutional and legal dimensions of freebies culture in Indian politics. It explores whether such practices align with constitutional principles, the extent of regulatory oversight, and the challenges in distinguishing legitimate welfare from electoral populism.

2. Concept and Meaning of Freebies in Political Context

The term “freebies” does not have a precise legal definition but is commonly used to describe goods or services provided free of cost or at highly subsidized rates by the government, often as part of electoral promises. These may range from essential services like food and healthcare to non-essential items such as consumer electronics.

In the political context, freebies are often associated with populist measures aimed at gaining electoral advantage. They are typically announced in party manifestos or during election campaigns and are implemented after coming to power.

It is important to distinguish between welfare schemes and freebies. Welfare schemes are generally aimed at promoting social justice and improving living conditions, particularly for disadvantaged groups. They are grounded in constitutional principles, particularly the Directive Principles of State Policy. Freebies, however, are often criticized for lacking long-term policy objectives and being driven primarily by electoral considerations.

The ambiguity in defining freebies creates challenges in regulating such practices, as it becomes difficult to draw a clear line between legitimate welfare measures and politically motivated giveaways.

3. Constitutional Framework: Welfare State and Directive Principles

The Indian Constitution envisions India as a welfare state committed to social and economic justice. The Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV) provide the foundation for various welfare measures



undertaken by the government. Articles such as 38, 39, 41, and 47 emphasize the responsibility of the state to promote the welfare of the people, reduce inequalities, and ensure access to basic necessities.

These provisions justify the implementation of welfare schemes aimed at improving the socio-economic conditions of citizens. For instance, schemes related to food security, education, and healthcare are aligned with constitutional goals.

However, the Constitution does not explicitly address the issue of electoral freebies. This creates a grey area where political parties can justify various promises as welfare measures, even if they lack long-term sustainability.

The challenge lies in balancing the objectives of a welfare state with the need for fiscal discipline and responsible governance. Excessive reliance on freebies may undermine economic stability and divert resources from essential public services.

4. Legal Dimensions of Electoral Promises

The legal regulation of electoral promises in India is primarily governed by the Representation of the People Act, 1951, and the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) issued by the Election Commission of India (ECI). However, these frameworks have limitations in addressing the issue of freebies.

The MCC provides guidelines for ethical conduct during elections, including restrictions on bribery and undue influence. However, it does not explicitly prohibit the promise of freebies in election manifestos. Political parties often argue that such promises fall within their policy domain and are part of democratic expression.

The Supreme Court addressed this issue in *Subramaniam Balaji v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2013), where it held that the distribution of freebies does not constitute a corrupt practice under the Representation of the People Act. The Court recognized the role of welfare schemes in a democratic society but also expressed concerns about their impact on public finances.

The Court directed the Election Commission to frame guidelines for regulating election manifestos. In response, the ECI included provisions in the MCC requiring parties to provide details of the financial implications of their promises. However, these guidelines are not legally binding and lack enforcement mechanisms.



5. Judicial Perspective on Freebies Culture

The judiciary has played a crucial role in shaping the discourse on freebies in Indian politics. In the landmark case of *Subramaniam Balaji v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2013), the Supreme Court examined the constitutional validity of free distribution schemes implemented by the Tamil Nadu government.

The Court held that such schemes do not violate constitutional provisions and cannot be considered bribery under election law. It recognized that welfare measures are an essential aspect of governance and are consistent with the Directive Principles of State Policy.

However, the Court also acknowledged the need for regulation and transparency in electoral promises. It emphasized that political parties should act responsibly and consider the financial implications of their commitments.

Subsequent judicial observations have reiterated the importance of maintaining a balance between welfare objectives and fiscal prudence. The judiciary has also highlighted the need for legislative intervention to address the issue more effectively.

6. Economic and Fiscal Implications

The proliferation of freebies has significant economic and fiscal implications. Large-scale distribution of free goods and services can place a substantial burden on public finances, leading to increased fiscal deficits and debt.

States with limited financial resources may struggle to sustain such schemes, affecting their ability to invest in essential infrastructure and development projects. This can have long-term consequences for economic growth and stability.

Moreover, freebies may create a culture of dependency, reducing incentives for productivity and self-reliance. Critics argue that such policies may undermine the principles of economic efficiency and responsible governance.

On the other hand, supporters contend that targeted welfare measures can stimulate demand, reduce poverty, and promote inclusive growth. The challenge lies in designing policies that balance immediate social needs with long-term economic sustainability.

7. Challenges in Regulating Freebies Culture

The regulation of freebies in Indian politics presents a complex challenge due to the absence of a clear legal definition and uniform standards. One of the primary issues is the difficulty in distinguishing between



legitimate welfare schemes and populist electoral promises. Since both are often justified under the Directive Principles of State Policy, it becomes challenging to impose legal restrictions without undermining the welfare objectives of the state.

Another significant challenge is the lack of binding regulatory mechanisms. The Model Code of Conduct issued by the Election Commission of India provides only advisory guidelines, which are not legally enforceable. Political parties are not compelled to adhere strictly to these guidelines, resulting in continued proliferation of freebies during elections.

The issue of political consensus further complicates regulation. Since all major political parties engage in similar practices, there is little incentive to introduce stringent legal controls. Any attempt to regulate freebies may be perceived as politically motivated or discriminatory.

Additionally, the federal structure of India poses challenges, as states have autonomy in designing welfare policies. Central intervention in state-level schemes may raise concerns about federal overreach. These factors collectively make the regulation of freebies a sensitive and complex issue.

8. Ethical and Democratic Concerns

The culture of freebies raises important ethical and democratic questions. One of the primary concerns is that such practices may influence voter behavior in a manner that undermines the principles of free and fair elections. When voters are attracted by immediate material benefits, the focus may shift away from long-term policy considerations and governance issues.

This trend can weaken democratic accountability, as political parties may prioritize short-term electoral gains over sustainable development. It may also reduce the quality of political discourse, with less emphasis on ideology, policy, and governance.

Another ethical concern is the potential misuse of public funds. Freebies are financed through taxpayer money, raising questions about the responsible use of public resources. The allocation of funds for non-essential items may divert resources from critical sectors such as healthcare, education, and infrastructure.

However, it is also important to recognize that welfare measures are essential for addressing socio-economic inequalities. The ethical debate, therefore, revolves around the extent and nature of such measures, rather than their existence.



9. Comparative Perspective: Global Practices

A comparative analysis of other democratic countries reveals that the issue of electoral populism is not unique to India. Many countries witness similar practices, where political parties promise subsidies, tax cuts, or social benefits to gain electoral support.

In developed democracies such as the United States and the United Kingdom, welfare policies are often debated within the framework of fiscal responsibility and public accountability. While political promises are common, there are stronger institutional mechanisms to ensure transparency and financial sustainability.

In contrast, some developing countries experience more pronounced forms of populism, with extensive distribution of goods and services during elections. These practices often reflect underlying socio-economic challenges and governance issues.

The comparative perspective highlights the importance of institutional checks and public awareness in regulating electoral practices. It also underscores the need for a balanced approach that accommodates welfare objectives while ensuring fiscal discipline.

10. Role of the Election Commission of India

The Election Commission of India (ECI) plays a crucial role in ensuring free and fair elections. In response to concerns about freebies, the ECI has introduced guidelines requiring political parties to provide details of the financial implications of their electoral promises.

These guidelines aim to promote transparency and enable voters to make informed decisions. Political parties are expected to indicate how they plan to fund their promises and assess their impact on the economy.

However, the ECI's powers are limited in this regard. The guidelines are part of the Model Code of Conduct and are not legally binding. The Commission lacks the authority to penalize parties for making unrealistic or unsustainable promises.

Despite these limitations, the ECI continues to play an important role in raising awareness and encouraging responsible political behavior. Strengthening its powers through legislative measures could enhance its effectiveness in regulating freebies.



11. Need for Legal and Policy Reforms

Addressing the issue of freebies requires comprehensive legal and policy reforms. One of the key steps is to develop a clear legal definition of freebies, distinguishing them from welfare schemes. This would provide a basis for regulation and reduce ambiguity.

Legislative intervention is necessary to make guidelines on electoral promises legally enforceable. Amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1951, could introduce provisions requiring transparency, fiscal responsibility, and accountability in election manifestos.

Another important reform is the establishment of independent mechanisms to assess the financial viability of electoral promises. This could involve expert committees or fiscal councils that evaluate the economic impact of proposed schemes.

Public awareness and voter education are also essential. Educating citizens about the long-term implications of freebies can encourage more informed voting behavior and promote accountability.

12. Future Prospects

The future of freebies culture in Indian politics will depend on the evolving interplay between legal frameworks, political practices, and public awareness. As India continues to develop economically and socially, there is likely to be increased scrutiny of fiscal policies and governance standards.

Technological advancements and greater access to information may empower voters to critically evaluate political promises. This could lead to a shift towards more issue-based and policy-driven electoral campaigns.

At the same time, the demand for welfare measures is likely to persist, particularly in a country with significant socio-economic disparities. The challenge will be to design policies that are both inclusive and sustainable.

Judicial intervention may continue to play a role in shaping the legal discourse, but long-term solutions will require legislative action and political consensus. A balanced approach that integrates welfare objectives with fiscal discipline will be essential for the future.

13. Conclusion

The culture of freebies in Indian politics presents a complex interplay of constitutional, legal, economic, and ethical considerations. While welfare measures are an integral part of a democratic and welfare-



oriented state, the unchecked proliferation of freebies raises concerns about fiscal sustainability, electoral fairness, and democratic accountability.

The existing legal framework, including the Representation of the People Act and the Model Code of Conduct, provides limited regulation of electoral promises. Judicial pronouncements have recognized the legitimacy of welfare schemes but have also emphasized the need for transparency and responsibility.

Addressing the challenges associated with freebies requires a multi-faceted approach involving legal reforms, institutional strengthening, and public awareness. By establishing clear guidelines and ensuring accountability, it is possible to balance the objectives of social welfare with the principles of good governance.

In conclusion, the issue of freebies should not be viewed in isolation but as part of a broader discourse on democratic values, economic policy, and constitutional governance. A nuanced and balanced approach is essential to ensure that welfare measures serve their intended purpose without compromising the integrity of the democratic process.

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